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Why Policies Have Problems Achieving Optimal Results: A Review of the Literature on Policy Implementation

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ABSTRACT

The number of studies in the field of policy implementation has now reached a point at which it might be useful to simply pull together the various strands in an effort to clarify and sharpen understanding. This article poses the question: "what do we now know about the problem of achieving optimal policy results?" The findings suggest that past scholars have tended to explain the problem of implementation in anyone of thirteen ways or a combination thereof: (1) administrative control problem; (2) inadequate resources; (3) uneasy inter-governmental relations; (4) problematic nature of policy itself; (5) lack of pressures from target groups; (6) disagreement over goals; (7) unfavorable disposition of implementors; (8) the complexity of joint action; (9) ambiguous goals and communications; (10) faulty theory of causation; (11) faulty study design; (12) a non-participatory process; and (13) uncertainties. Collectively, these various efforts at conceptual frameworks provide a good aid to synthesizing thought about implementation and appreciating the complexity of the process. They not only provide a good checklist for anticipating the problems of the process, but point to the need to redirect research attention in the area to developing more integrated frameworks that can be applied in actual research situation.

This paper poses the question: "what do we now know about the problem of achieving optimal policy results?" Ever since emerging as a *bona fide* field of study in the 1970s, policy implementation has attracted calls for a diversity of approaches. Williams (1976, p. 288) once posited that research on policy implementation "will be more valuable when approached by people with different disciplinary perspectives and frameworks that provide diverse interpretations. So let variety flower." While recognizing that this suggestion might be a good thing particularly during the formative years of implementation theory, the number of studies in the field has now reached a point at which it might be useful to simply pull together the various strands in an effort to clarify and sharpen understanding (Nakamura and Smallwood 1980, p. 1). Judging from a review of the literature, there already appears to be some unnecessary reproductions in the field, as well as evidence of some researchers talking past one another. This paper focuses on reviewing works directly related to the field of policy implementation. The classification of the literature is original and unites related arguments in the field. In all, thirteen classifications are discussed.

The paper focuses on policies in the public domain, and avoids discussing the issue in terms of "implementation failure." Except for cases of non-implementation -- defined by McLaughlin (1976, p. 169) as when programs never get adopted or they get adopted but break down due to lack of interest by the target population -- programs rarely fail to cause an impact as much as they encounter problems in optimally achieving expectations. As such, the term "implementation problem" is preferred in referring to any policy with a proven track record, no matter how much has been achieved. On one level, the term refers to the myriad of generic factors that act to constrain the optimal achievement of policy goals (Hargrove 1975). On another, it refers to the objective reality of the program in terms of shortfalls in both the intended and unintended impacts of the policy.

Administrative Control Problem

The issue of control in the bureaucracy is perhaps the oldest and most prevalent explanation for the implementation problem. Whether defined as "the problem of getting work done and securing compliance with organizational rules" (Wilensky 1967, p. 3), or the process by which managers "ensure that rules are obeyed and orders followed" (Etzioni 1964, p. 68), most organizational theorists agree that the core implementation problem is essentially that of control and accountability in the bureaucracy (Wilson 1967; Bardach 1977; Dunsire 1978). That is, lower-level bureaucrats not carrying out the instructions of higher-level officials. According to Downs (1967, p. 134), this seemingly recalcitrant behavior originates from the "leakage of authority" inside bureaucracy. The leakage occurs because implementing officials have different goals "and each uses his discretion in translating orders from above into commands going downward." Consequently, "the purposes the superior had in mind will not be the precise ones his subordinate's orders convey to people further down the hierarchy." That is why each communication should aim at minimizing "leeway" for the organization that is charged with implementing it. Obviously, the more that actors in the process are allowed to act independently, the less the action will reflect the original intentions.

Short of minimizing leeway for the implementing organization, there has to be a system of explicit controls, sanctions and incentives which may be invoked by top bureaucrats to achieve compliance with policy among subordinate officials. Looked upon in this way, "the 'limits' of control would then depend on the amount of power (resources, legitimacy, authority, etc.) to operate sanctions and incentives possessed by one agency vis-a-vis those it is seeking to control" (Barrett and Fudge 1981, p. 20). Van Meter and Van Horn (1975, p. 466) state the imperative in this way:

> Successful implementation often requires institutional mechanisms and procedures whereby higher authorities (superiors) may increase the likelihood that implementors (subordinates) will act in a manner consistent with a policy's standards and objectives... orders are not self-executing: they require the presence of an action-forcing mechanism.

Remedying the problem of implementation, therefore, becomes a question of controlling discretion and maximizing routines in the bureaucracy. The objection that this raises is that the interpretation is "too narrow a focus" (Bardach 1977, p. 46), as it only identifies one aspect of the "bureaucracy problem" (Wilson 1967, p. 3-9). After all, implementation processes, notes the former:

> ... are driven at least as much if not more by inter-organizational transactions as by intra-organizational transactions. The array of relevant actors in the implementation process is large and diverse, including, in addition to government bureaus, their clients, private contractors, professional associations, publicists, and so forth. All of these actors are quite capable of articulating their own special fears and anxieties.

So, even though administrative control is generally accepted as the issue that is most relevant to understanding the implementation problem, the above criticism denotes that such an understanding will be incomplete without taking into account those impacts and effects that result from the external environment.

Inadequate Resources

Problems related to resources have tended to be the mainstay of explanations for the policy implementation gap, especially in the developing world where resources are generally scarcer. This derives first from the truism that a threshold of policy resources is necessary for there to be any possibility of realizing policy objectives; and then from the logic that the level of resources above this threshold, up to some saturation point, is usually proportional to the probability of optimally achieving those objectives (Mazmanian and Sabatier 1981, p. 11).

Defined as the cumulative effort necessary to achieve policy aims, the concept of policy resources consists of several elements. First among these is fiscal, or the amount of funds allocated for both the policy's capital and operating costs. This is usually stated in monetary terms but it may also be in the form of capital assets, such as the amount of space, facilities and equipment devoted to the policy. Second is the personnel to operationalize the policy which, more than just the "sheer" manpower, includes the kinds of personnel and level

of qualifications needed. Third is the time available to get things done. Given that almost all policies in the public domain come with a political timetable, time is a particularly critical resource in implementation. It restricts how deeply the problem can be researched and planned for, as well as the level of success to be attained by the policy. The degree to which a policy's performance is judged satisfactory would obviously depend on when, in the life of the policy, the evaluation is carried out.

Political support to see policy initiatives through is the fourth element. This form of support is termed political inasmuch as it differs from the type of support provided by the legal imperatives of policy (Rein and Rabinovitz 1978; Mazmanian and Sabatier 1981). As a rule, policy makers have to maintain a strong, if not united, support for a policy for it to have a reasonable chance of implementation. This support may take the form of what Bardach (1977) refers to as the "fixer," a legislator or person of authority who is personally interested in the policy, and who will guide it through the playing out of the various implementation games until the goals are realized. In evaluation, Patton (1978) refers to this notion of the "fixer" as the "personal factor" in policy.

Finally, there is the element of information resource respecting both the problem to be addressed and the techniques by which to address it (i.e., relevant information on both theory and technology). Every policy implies a substantive causal understanding of a problem and a procedural theory of action on how it should be solved. Referring to the latter, Shanks (1983, p. 59) commented that, "while not discussed in the policy literature, it would seem that the mechanism used to implement the policy might be an important component of the policy resources components."

The one latent problem with the resource approach to understanding the implementation gap is that no amount of resources applied to a bad idea, even when rightly applied, will produce good results. This is the concept of "substantive irrationality," which refers to the ethical problem in planning involving the use of the right means to achieve the wrong ends.

Uneasy Inter-Governmental Relations

That relations between levels of government impact on implementation is an interpretation favored by political scientists who have studied the federalist system of government in which powers are divided between two levels of government, each being independent of one another within its assigned jurisdiction. As the problem is conceived, conflict typically ensues whenever there is an attempt to implement in one jurisdiction (e.g., local/provincial jurisdiction) programs that are financed wholly or in part by the other jurisdiction (e.g., the federal jurisdiction). Yet, almost all contemporary public programs involve a significant degree of collaboration between authorities in these jurisdictions.

It is in respect of this difficult situation that the fate of implementation is postulated as likely to be structurally determined along lines of the federalist constitutional structure. The study by Murphy (1971) concerning the 1965 Elementary and Secondary School Education Act (ESEA) in the U.S., is among the early observations of structural limits to federally initiated programs. In this work, Murphy (1971, p. 60) writes that to blame the implementation problems of the ESEA on "timidity, incompetence, or 'selling out' is to beg the question.... The primary cause... is political. The federal system -- with its dispersion of power and control -- not only permits but encourages the evasion and dilution of federal reform, making it nearly impossible for the federal administrator to impose program priorities."

Derthick (1972), in her study of the failure of the New Town in Town program, also draws a similar conclusion by blaming the failure of the program on the "disabilities" of a central government to order changes in local priorities. Because the division of authority among governments in the U.S. federal system makes it *ultra vires* for the federal government to order these governments to do anything, the federal government can only get the local governments to "carry out its purposes by offering incentives in the form of aid, which they may accept or not, and by attaching conditions to the aid" (Derthick 1972, p. 84).[1] But even

1. In using the same framework, Ingram (1977, p. 499) notes a similar relationship between the federal and state governments. She points out that "it is difficult for the federal government to

at that, observes Bardach (1977, p. 46), the problem still abounds, because the federal government neither commands an unlimited supply of incentives nor knows what sort of incentives the local institutions might respond to.

Berman (1978, p. 157) later wraps the federalist argument in new jargon -- *The Study of Macro- and Micro Implementation*. Premised on the conviction that "implementation problems stem mostly from the interaction of a policy within its institutional setting," Berman argues that the federal macro-implementation problem can be distinguished from the local micro-implementation problem in such a way that the former occurs in a "loosely coupled" setting, and involves a multitude of actors as well as decisions on who gets what, when, where and how. At this institutional setting, the chief concern is how to execute the policy, so as to cause local delivery agencies to behave in the desired ways. On the other hand, the micro-implementation problem is viewed as occurring in a less "loosely coupled" environment, and involving mainly attempts by local organizations to respond to federal directives through adaptation of those directives to fit local conditions and administrative practices. After examining interactions at both of these institutional levels, Berman (1978, p. 157, 179) concludes that "micro-implementation cannot be successful unless local delivery organizations undergo an adaptive process."

In terms of the drawbacks to conceptualizing the implementation problem as a "center-periphery" conflict, it may be asked: what is to be made of the implementation gap when there is not such a dialectic, either as a result of a consensus on the policy or as a result of independent policy initiatives at the various levels of government?

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induce states to change substantially unless federal goals are shared;" and that "rather than buy compliance by offering a grant, the federal government achieves only the opportunity to bargain with states."

Problematic Nature of Policy Itself

In their search for an alternate explanation for the implementation problem, Barrett and Fudge (1981, p. 129) note that they keep "coming back again and again to the question of policy [itself] as the key to the whole debate about implementation." This notion of the nature of policy as a single way of generalizing the multiple variables that constrain administrative action, was first suggested by Lowi (1964) when he observed that, depending on the kind of policy that is pursued, different types of pressures are brought to bear on the policy making process. Lowi's (1964, p. 688) argument was that:

> (1) The types of relationship to be found among people are determined by their expectations -- by what they hope to achieve or get from relating to others. (2) In politics, expectations are determined by government outputs and policies. (3) Therefore, a political relationship is determined by the type of policy at stake, so that for every type of policy there is likely to be a distinctive type of political relationship.

He postulated three types of policies: distributive, redistributive and regulatory policies. Distributive policies are held to generate low-level conflict for the two reasons that there are no clear winners and losers; and the costs are absorbed by the system or distributed broadly across the larger population so that the cost to any one individual or group is negligible. Redistributive policies, on the other hand, involve clear winners and losers but, because the dialectic is often between only two broad social groups (the "haves" and the "haves-not"), the conflict generated is moderate. Regulatory policies, the last element of Lowi's typology, involves not only clear winners and losers, but also the participation of numerous groups in the process which induces a high-level of conflict.

Building on this basic framework, Grindle (1980, p. 8) further observes that "a distinction can also be made between programs providing collective benefits, which encourage categorical demand making, and those providing benefits that are divisible, which may mobilize more particularistic kinds of demands at the implementation stage." So, as could be fathomed:

> Programs delivering collective goods such as the provision of light and water in urban slum neighborhoods may be readily implemented.... because the compliance of groups or localities affected will tend to be forthcoming with minimal amount of conflict or dissent. [Whereas] programs with divisible benefits such as housing, in contrast, may exacerbate conflict and competition among those seeking to benefit from them and may be more difficult to execute as intended.

Thus, recognizing this fact that certain policies, simply by virtue of their nature, are candidates for implementation problems, scholars have identified additional significant characteristics of policy. One such characteristic is the substantive subject matter of policy (e.g., public housing, transportation, education, agriculture, health, etc.). It is suggested that this would not only set the stage in terms of the actors, agencies and interests to be involved in the implementation, but also influence the dynamics of the process.[2]

In similar ways to the effects of substance, policy goals and expectations are also hypothesized to help set the stage for what is put at stake, who is to be indulged,[3] in what arena and under what rules. It is maintained that these matters frequently determine the agenda for negotiations, as well as the attitudes, values and stances actors bring with them to the process. The goals and expectations of any policy might be said to largely establish the mood under which that policy's directives are further analyzed, objectified, put into effect and finally evaluated.

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2. Temple and Temple (1980) give the example in which the following intrinsic attributes of public housing impact on outcome:

(1) the conspicuous fact that, despite housing *per se* being a basic need, its supply in the public domain is almost always short;
(2) the fact that public housing is a divisible rather than a collective good;
(3) the fact that public housing is usually priced at cost or lower compared to the market value; and
(4) the fact that public housing is extraordinarily visible, making success or failure less difficult to discern.

As the authors view it, because the substantive nature of public housing is such that a basic scarce, tangible, divisive and conspicuous benefit is conferred on a small number of individuals at a cost lower than the market value, its impact on implementation tends to be that individuals and groups with greater political power will seek to acquire this benefit for themselves. This makes shortfalls from such a policy likely due to the intrinsic aspects of centrally-provided housing than to other causes.

3. For example, Mazmanian and Sabatier (1981, p. 13) note that opportunities for participation in the process by actors external to the implementing agencies are often deliberately biased towards supporters of the policy.

Another hypothesis posited by Lindblom (1959) suggests that the smaller the scope of behavioral change to be made, the less problematic successful implementation. As Berman (1980, p. 213) explains, this is because, in such a case, "implementation can be programmed along existing lines of authority and can consist of modifications to established standard operating procedures." But "where policy involves major behavioral changes," resistance is more likely as "existing routines have to be redesigned, replaced or sidestepped and new routines must be invented". Mazmanian and Sabatier (1981) also advanced a similar argument when they suggested that the "tractability" of the problem being addressed will probably impact on implementation. Some problems are obviously more manageable than others, depending on the level of uncertainty or the amount of knowledge that exists.

Finally, in assessing the difficulties inherent in viewing the implementation problem as stemming from the nature of policy itself, it is not hard to see that the classifications presented are broad and lacking in explicit criteria. This reduces the prospects of using the approach to predict and, possibly, preempt some of the problems of the policy process before they actually occur. Furthermore, it is a major analytic problem to attempt to define the nature of policies in the public domain. Such policies defy neat categorizations and definitions. Finally, it can be argued that any proposition about a particular policy ultimately relates to its nature, especially when this method of analysis is still in its infancy, and there are no widely accepted typologies (Quick 1980, p. 40).

Lack of Pressures from Target Groups

In the work referred to earlier on the ESEA, Murphy (1971) advances the view of implementation as a system of pressures and counter-pressures. After finding that the problems of implementing federally initiated reform are related to a number of causes including: (1) the fact that the reformers are not the implementors, (2) inadequate staff, (3) a law and tradition favoring local control, and (4) absence of pressure from the poor, Murphy

suggests that the core problem is the absence of pressures from the poor and their allies in terms of being able to exert their demands on the system. This suggestion is not unlike the argument that gave rise to the era of advocacy planning in the U.S. around the same period of time. Building on the pluralist ideology, in which society's numerous and diverse groups compete to shape public policy, advocacy planning, as envisioned by Davidoff (1965), argued that the reason the poor in the U.S. did not benefit from the reform programs of the Great Society is that they were largely unorganized and marginalized from the pressure system. Yet, in the system of pressure politics, public policy reflects primarily the interests of the well organized within the system. Thereafter, Davidoff envisioned transferring expert knowledge to the marginalized poor groups as a means of bringing them into the group pressure system.

Thus, believing as does Davidoff that "the successful implementation of reform depends heavily on the distribution of power," Murphy (1971, p. 39, 62) also proposed empowerment of the poor as the only real method of overcoming problems of the process. As he saw it, the balance of power is so tilted against the disadvantaged within the system that many more poor would have to become organized on an individual basis, while banding together as communities on a nationwide basis to bring pressures to bear. With specific reference to the ESEA Title 1 program, Murphy wrote that: "the expansion of local counter-pressures appears necessary and worth the risk if we are serious about translating the spirit of Title 1 reform into educational practice."

While it is unquestionable that the empirical evidence supports the view that "pressure politics" does describe some of the dynamics of the implementation process, Bardach (1977, p. 39) asks: What are we to make of the implementation gap when everyone is agreed on the principal objectives? Presumably, in such a case, the dialectic of pressure and counter-pressure ceases to exist and, therefore, could no longer shape relations and outcomes. This is an interesting question but hardly a serious shortcoming for the interpretation. It is a rarity to find a policy where there are common views concerning both desired social ends as well as means toward them. A more serious drawback to the interpretation is the conceptual

problem that results from the fact that "pressure" can become a catchall phrase which, by describing everything, describes nothing well.

Disagreement over Goals

Bunker (1972) is considered the originator of this interpretation. In what Bardach (1977) refers to as the earliest attempt he had found to conceptualize the "implementation process" as a distinctive phenomenon of the policy process, Bunker suggests that a simple massing of "assent" is all that is required for successful implementation. As he had put it:

> For benefits consistent with the concept or design to be realized, those charged with carrying out the policy, and those to be affected by it, must yield some degree of assent. The requirement varies from passive but tolerant acquiescence on the part of some to scrupulous, informed and intense commitment for others who take responsibility for the guidance and execution of the plan (Bunker 1972, p. 72).

Based on this understanding, Bunker envisages a solution scheme for the problems of the process in which all relevant actors are identified and located at some point in a three dimensional space defined by vectors of: (1) issue salience, or the centrality of the issue for a particular individual; (2) power resources, or the number/potency of political resources an actor has available; and (3) agreement, or position of an actor relative to that of an advocate of the policy. It is these dimensions which, when identified and weighted, would provide a summary estimate of the probability of policy implementation.

"Disagreement over goals" as the core implementation problem is obviously an interpretation in good currency, especially when it is considered that Lindblom's (1959) definition of a "good" policy as the one on which political consensus can be found, held a great deal of sway in recent thinking. Nevertheless, the interpretation contains several flaws, the least of which are the practicalities of the proposed solution. As Bardach sees it, the chief problem with Bunker's view is its presumption that the same type of coalition politics characteristic of the policy-adoption stage, is also found at the policy-execution stage. Arguing that this is not the case, Bardach (1977, p. 42-3) suggests that implementation politics

is distinguished from policy-adoption politics by the characteristic absence of coalitions and the characteristic presence of "defensive" politics involving fragmented and isolated maneuvers and counter-maneuvers. He maintains that, in this special kind of politics, actors in the process are generally concerned with what they might lose individually, as opposed to what might be gained collectively.

While agreeing with Bardach that Bunker's interpretation entails some serious flaws, Shanks (1983, p. 48-9) disagrees that, because the politics of implementation necessarily takes a defensive form, it follows that coalitions cannot exist or be forged. In fact, Shanks argues the opposite to be more likely, since individuals rarely perceive their self-interests in the abstract and are generally driven to action only upon the realization of actual impacts. Hinting at this likely scenario in his opening paragraph, Bunker (1972, p. 71) writes:

> It is a worn, but important, truism that the real content of policy can be known more accurately by observing uniformities in the behavior of those charged with carrying out official dicta than by studying the formal policy documents.... Until public behavior is affected, it is not proper to talk of public policy formation.

On balance, the real difficulty in accepting the notion of "disagreement over goals" as the central concept in explaining the implementation problem is that: as people, organizations and circumstances change, so do previously made agreements. Furthermore, if enough time is allowed to elapse, it is hard to imagine any set of agreements remaining firm. This is the view taken by Pressman and Wildavsky (1984, p. 92) who find that not too far behind any agreements are several latent conflicts which only time can bring to the fore.

Unfavorable Disposition of Implementors

Another significant diagnosis of the implementation problem is the behavioral obstacle arising from the commitment or policy orientation of implementing officials. According to this diagnosis, unless a policy is introduced into a supportive environment, not just a neutral one, the responsible administrative agents are likely to derail the policy and undermine the process.

This will be either because: (1) the officials are not aware that they are not in full compliance with the general intent, as well as the specific standards and objectives of the policy; or (2) their values and sense of self-interest or preferred courses of action are offended by the goals contained in the policy; or (3) the officials' negative dispositions cause them to defy program objectives by means of surreptitious diversion and evasion (i.e., through oversight and slack enforcement). The suggestion is that, under conditions of cognitive dissonance, officials may unknowingly impede implementation, first either by screening out a clear message when it seems to contradict deeply cherished beliefs; or by attempting to redefine the message to fit what is felt it ought to have been. As Sabatier and Mazmanian (1981, p. 13) explain:

> No matter how well a statute structures the formal decision process, the attainment of statutory objectives that seek to significantly modify target group behavior is unlikely unless officials in the implementing agencies are strongly committed to the achievement of those objectives. Any new program requires implementors who are not merely neutral but significantly persistent to develop new regulations and standard operating procedures, and to enforce them in the face of resistance from target groups and from public officials reluctant to make the mandated changes.

In this view, "the major explanation" for the implementation problem is the failure on the part of implementing officials to overcome their natural resistance to change, and to develop enthusiasm and widespread acceptance for the policy's standards and objectives. Mazmanian and Sabatier (1981, p. 13) suggest two mechanisms available to statutory framers to reasonably assure that implementing officials have the requisite commitment to statutory objectives. They suggest selecting top implementing officials from a pool of policy supporters, or assigning responsibility for implementation to agencies whose policy orientation is consistent with the statute and that will accord the new program high priority.

The Complexity of Joint Action

Whatever the underlying reasons, this is the story of too many cooks spoiling the broth. Pressman and Wildavsky (1973) coined the phrase the "complexity of joint action" to illustrate implementation difficulties arising from the participation of too many actors in the

process and the resultant blurring of lines of authority. Where a large number of disparate actors are involved in the process, the consequences cannot but be: (1) proliferation of veto or decision/clearance points, (2) muddling of objectives due to diverse perspectives, (3) heightened conflict and intergroup rivalry, (4) divided loyalty, (5) lack of coordination and (6) the diversion of energy in the playing out of a number of loosely interrelated games.[4] And where competing government agencies at different levels have overlapping duties, no one may be willing or able to exercise final authority and, consequently, no one does anything or they do as they wish.

Arising "largely from the difficulty of coordinating the activities of several different units, each of which has its own goals and established routine," (Montjoy and O'Toole 1979, p. 473) the complexity of joint action always results in "disagreement" and "delay;" an eventuality on which Pressman and Wildavsky (1984, p. 87) suggest we need not frown or show surprise. In their view, if we come to understand the complexity of joint administrative action, we might wonder rather more why programs are attempted in the first place, or why they work at all, instead of expressing amazement at their shortfalls.

The problem with this line of explanation is that not all policy implementation involves a multi-jurisdiction web of federal, state and local agencies, as well as a large number of non-governmental organizations and private individuals. Moreover, implementation problems have also been reported in programs involving only community or neighborhood participants (Gill and Thrasher 1985).

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4. This last point is Bardach's (1977) major contribution to the field. In using the metaphor of "games" to describe the process, Bardach conceives implementation as a series of loosely interconnected activities of a multitude of quasi-autonomous actors directed at safeguarding what they already have, while simultaneously using this as leverage to attempt to gain access to those program elements not yet under their control.

Ambiguous Goals and Communications

Ambiguity in policy goals, whether caused by design, misunderstanding, uncertainties or value conflict, is held by nearly all implementation researchers to be a significant part of the implementation problem. This is especially the belief of two groups of researchers: (1) those who see implementation as basically "putting policy into effect" (Pressman and Wildavsky 1973; Sabatier and Mazmanian 1979); and (2) those who are interested in policy evaluation (Weiss 1972; Rossi 1972; Ruthman 1984). The argument from both camps is that "statutory objectives that are precise and clearly ranked in importance serve as an indispensable aid in program evaluation, as unambiguous directives to implementing officials" (Sabatier and Mazmanian 1979). It is assumed that, without the guidance of lucid program goals, evaluators would flounder and not be able to ask the relevant and insightful questions about the program; whereas implementing officials would be left with inadequate guidance, not only unaware of what behavior is expected of them, but most likely to fill in the gap using their own discretion which is almost always at odds with the original intentions. Commenting on a bureaucrat's typical response to similar quandaries, Kaufman (1973, p. 3) writes: "Confronted by demands he cannot satisfy, he will fashion his own policies to handle the situation. His own policies often do not coincide with the policies of his leaders." Hence, proponents of this theme of the implementation problem focus on ways a statute or other policy directive can constrain what occurs during execution.

In Sabatier and Mazmanian's (1979, p. 487-92) list of conditions for effective policy implementation, number two is that "the statute (or other basic policy decision) contains unambiguous policy directives and structures the implementation process so as to maximize the likelihood that target groups will perform as desired." The unmistakable implication of this condition is that implementation would be smooth, if only policy directives input to implementing bureaus are unambiguous and non-contradictory in terms of stating exactly what is to be done and exactly who is to be responsible for doing what. Some critics find this an

over simplification of the implementation reality, in that it cannot be assured that unambiguous policy directives necessarily result in more faithful execution. As Shanks (1983, p. 55) points out, "one can envisage a situation where overzealous concentration on defined policy objectives during implementation could lead to less than optimal results such as in the case of a clear shift in values from the time of policy formation to implementation." Furthermore, continues Shanks, "no matter how clear the policy makers may think the objectives have been spelled out, implementors still have to apply their own process to these objectives and, in some sense, the outcome of the process will reflect the characteristics of the implementation participants."

So, in essence, what the condition calls for "are precisely those which political processes are likely to undermine" (Barrett and Fudge 1981, p. 19). Not only are there many good reasons for expecting ambiguity in public policy directives but, in most situations, the phenomenon is wholly unavoidable. In *Thinking about Programmed and Adaptive Implementation*, Berman (1980) advances the argument that unambiguous policy (identified with the former) is not necessarily best for implementation, because it does not enable initial plans to be adapted to unfolding (local) events, decisions and circumstances. Yet, "it is necessary for policies to be reinvented so that they better fit local needs" or "the needs and standard operating procedures of the agencies and individuals that carry them out" (Palumbo and Harder 1981, p. x-xi). Whether viewed as "mutual adaptation" (McLaughlin 1976; Browne and Wildavsky 1984) or "evolution" (Majone and Wildavsky 1979) or a "bargaining process" (Ingram 1977; Barrett and Fudge 1981), the unquestionable suggestion is that successful implementation requires flexibility in policies, so that they can be contextualized in implementation. McLaughlin (1976, p. 169) makes this observation:

> Where implementation was successful, and where significant change in participants attitudes, skills, and behavior occurred, implementation was characterized by a process of mutual adaptation in which project goals and methods were modified to suit the needs and interests of the local staff and in which that staff changed to meet the requirements of the project.

That is basically why, for many like Berman (1978, p. 168), "whatever implementation difficulties it may cause, ambiguity seems both inevitable and desirable in the political process of passing a law."

Faulty Theory of Causation

Every policy implies a theory or causal relationship, observe Pressman and Wildavsky (1973, p. xiv). "The question is never whether a theory is there (it always is).... A promise underlies policy: if the actions we recommend are undertaken, good (intended) consequences rather than bad (unintended) ones actually occur" (Wildavsky 1979, p. 35). Policy is an "if-then" statement in the sense that -- "If X is done, then Y will result." (For a detailed description of elements comprising policy theory, see Hoppe et al. 1987.) Shanks (1983, p. 15) gives an example from water resources management to illustrate this point:

> A policy might be adopted to attempt to reduce flood damages on a river floodplain. The policy could be further specified to include that it will be implemented by establishing a system of dykes along the river. This policy output embodies the hypothesis that, if the dykes are constructed to particular specifications, then a defined degree of flood protection will be afforded to the adjoining lands. Consideration of the policy output in this manner facilitates clear ex post evaluation. If, in June, lands, that were thought to be protected, are flooded, research into the shortfall can proceed by dissecting the hypothesis. Were the dykes constructed to the standard implied in the policy? Was some degree of protection provided, albeit lesser than anticipated? Is the hypothesized relationship between dykes and (flood) protection valid? Did the policy implicitly assume structural methods of flood control are the most effective means of reducing flood damages? These and other related questions flow from the policy when it is seen in the light of an "if-then" hypothesis.

Shanks' question is not at all unfamiliar to evaluation researchers who, upon finding that a program is ineffective, pose the crucial question: did the program's substantive theory fail or did its procedural implementation theory fail? According to Sabatier and Mazmanian (1979, p. 486), a program's underlying theory can be divided into two components:

> the first relating achievement of the desired end-state(s) back to changes in target group behavior, the second specifying the means by which target group compliance can be obtained. Both the "technical" and the "compliance" components must be valid for the policy objective(s) to be obtained.

Thus, in order to conclude either a failure of theory or program, "one must be sure that the program was actually implemented in accordance with the expectations of those hypothesizing the particular causal process" (Shanks 1983, p 44). Therefore, poor policy outcome can result from either valid theory poorly implemented or a faithfully implemented policy based on invalid theory (Rossi and Wright 1977).

It is in the above regard that implementation increasingly came to be viewed as "hypothesis testing," with the chief problem often times being a faulty theory of causation. This is evidenced by the fact that Sabatier and Mazmanian's (1979, p. 484) first condition for effective implementation is that: "The program is based on a sound theory relating changes in target group behavior to the achievement of the desired end-state (objectives)." To make certain that the centrality of this condition is not missed or taken less seriously, Bardach (1977, p. 250) urges consideration of the following humorous hypothetical example:

> If congress were to establish an agency charged with squaring the circle with compass and straight edge -- a task mathematicians have long ago shown impossible -- we could envision an agency coming into being, hiring a vast number of consultants, commissioning studies, and reporting that progress was being made, while at the same time urging in their appropriations request for the coming year that the Congress augment the agency's budget so that it might undertake the development of a new and more promising sort of compass. After five years, much money would have been spent in vain, congressional sponsors would have dissociated themselves from the whole enterprise, and scholars would gravely cluck over the program's problems of implementation.

Whether it is in terms of aiding the researcher to ask the relevant cause-and-effect relationships questions, or in ascertaining early in the analysis whether a program's means for achieving goals are appropriate, there can be no dispute that conceiving implementation as hypothesis testing does provide an extremely useful method of focusing research on the process. The problem with the approach, however, is that, just as good implementation cannot overcome bad policy no matter how hard one tried (Patton 1986, p. 108), good theory cannot overcome bad implementation.

Faulty Study Design

Almost all analyses of the implementation problem presume a top-down perspective insofar as they take "substantive policy" to be the common purpose or starting point from which implementation and everything else flows. Contemporary research, even when acknowledging the independence of action by actors in the process, still tends to operate on the assumption that there is a sense of common purpose about the process (Gill and Thrasher 1985, p. 40). Yet, when implementation is turned on its head and the behavior of "street-level bureaucrats," rather than those who formulate and convey policy, is taken as the starting point, the presumption of a common purpose becomes questionable to say the least (Lipsky 1978; 1980). That is, the presumption that policy itself is the referent for all the actors in the process, and that everyone in the process is, by implication, genuinely intent on implementing the formally prescribed policy directives. The net result of rejecting this top-down approach to analysis is that policy deliverers or street-level bureaucrats become the primary actors in the process, with others in the arena mainly providing the context for their discretionary judgments (Lipsky 1978, p. 398). After all, in the unequivocal words of Berman (1978, p. 157), "the effective power to determine a policy's outcome rests with local deliverers, not with federal administrators."

Thus, in contrast to the usual manner of interpreting the problem, the bottom-up perspective views the implementation difficulty as essentially deriving from a faulty study design which, by presuming a standard measure of effectiveness based on policy statements, produces a systematic bias towards identifying implementation problems. As Lipsky (1978, p. 398) explains, besides it being common knowledge that formal policy goals intentionally reach for lofty and unrealizable aims:

> Analysts who continue to pursue a policy-chain approach will continue to conclude that the system is ineffective in its own terms. Or they will continue to observe that the system is unresponsive to policy recipients and ultimately to itself, without having recognized that the articulated policy, in never addressing issues of the environment in which policy implementors practice, never addressed the critical issues of implementation. A focus on the work

> structure, in contrast, is a focus on what people do, not on an abstraction called "policy" or its fate.

Gill and Thrasher (1985, p. 42) put the argument this way: "[because] the street-level bureaucrat has a propensity to define the implementation problem in ways which may conflict with those higher in the organization, there may be many different versions of policy and, therefore, many versions of what is implied by successful implementation."

This fact that there may be many different versions of the same policy has witnessed a daring move towards "goal-free" evaluation. For instance, Scriven (1971, p. 1-2) finds the consideration of goals in evaluation both unnecessary and contaminating. His argument is that "the less the external evaluator hears about goals of the project, the less tunnel vision will develop, the more attention will be paid to looking for actual effects (rather than checking on alleged effects)." Similarly, in reflecting on the validity of "forward-mapping" of implementation, which might be said to accept the original policy sin as the beginning point, Browne and Wildavsky (1984, p. 208-9) dismiss the importance of goal-fixed evaluation, arguing that, "because the program is most intimate with its environment at the point of service delivery, much of the evaluation should occur there."

What all this implies is that the degree to which the implementation problem occurs, not only depends a good deal on the point in time the evaluation is done, but also on the institutional level of policy where it is done. Browne and Wildavsky write:

> The outcome of the resulting chain of implementation decisions cannot be predicted or measured according to indicators of formal, top-down hierarchies of control. The analytic onus is better placed on the decentralized, sometimes informal, and often unanticipated points of decision. Community politics, the behaviors of individuals outside the implementing domains, and the behaviors of individuals and groups within implementing organizations are recognized as determinants of policy outcome in backward mapping.

In a recent treatment of this topic, Desai (1988, p. 268) accepts that programs have goals but denies that these goals have any relevance for evaluation. He argues that the impacts of program can be better understand by "finding out what is actually done instead of what was intended to be done."

A Non-Participatory Process

That successful implementation is influenced by the degree to which target populations (implementors and recipients alike) have participated in the decision making or planning, is an interpretation of the process favored mainly by planners and organizational change theorists, based on the assumption that people are likely to obey laws if they believe in them and feel a part of them (Zeleny 1982). Despite the fact that there is no established causal relationship between level of participation *per se* and the acceptance of change, support has been found for the following related arguments:

(1) participation leads to higher staff morale, and high staff morale is necessary for successful implementation;

(2) participation leads to greater commitment, and a high degree of commitment is required for effecting change;

(3) participation leads to greater clarity about an innovation, and clarity is necessary for implementation;

(4) beginning with the postulate of a basic resistance to change, the argument is that participation will reduce initial resistance and thereby facilitate successful implementation; and

(5) subordinates will tend resist any innovation that they are expected to implement if it is initiated solely by their superiors (Gross et al. 1971, p. 24-5).

One inherent difficulty with this explanation is that the wider the range of participation, the less likely is consensus or decision making; and, as Gross et al. would agree, consensus is necessary for successful implementation. Obviously, "the more open the system is and the greater the number of actors with decision and veto power, the less likely are decisions to be made. An open and complex decision process that functions at many levels is always in danger of eroding consensus and distorting its initial priorities" (Rein and Rabinovitz 1978, p. 328).

Uncertainties

Policies of all nature invariably involve substantial uncertainties, and it is frequently in the implementation stage where these uncertainties must be resolved or, are at least, shown to exist. Defining uncertainties as the "unpredictabilities in factors which affect the success or direction of a course of action," Shanks (1983, p. 27) notes that one of its major effects on any public implementation process is "how values will have changed over time and thus perhaps shift the direction of the policy outcome from that which might have occurred in the absence of a value shift." Another major source of uncertainties, and by far the commonest source, is lack of knowledge or theory on the subject matter of policy. Much has been said on this already.

Finally, there is the source of uncertainty deriving from not knowing what the political and socioeconomic future might bring. Both the financial and political support for seeing through a particular policy are usually projected based on current conditions, which are by no means immutable to drastic changes. The sort of changes that may, and often do, occur include: (1) a change in government and, hence, in policy commitment and orientation; (2) death or neutralization of a prominent political supporter of the policy; and (3) shock or recession in the economy, thereafter reducing resources available for the policy and, perhaps, inevitably forcing a change in priority.

It is in light of these sort of uncertainties that Sabatier and Mazmanian (1979, p. 485), in the last of their five conditions for effective implementation, insist that: "The relative priority of statutory objectives is not significantly undermined over time by the emergence of conflicting policies or by changes in relevant socioeconomic conditions that undermine the statute's 'technical' theory of political support."

CONCLUSION

This paper provides an overview of scholarship on the problem of policy implementation. The findings suggest that past scholars have tended to explain the problem of implementation in anyone of thirteen ways or a combination thereof: (1) administrative control problem; (2) inadequate resources; (3) uneasy inter-governmental relations; (4) problematic nature of policy itself; (5) lack of pressures from target groups; (6) disagreement over goals; (7) unfavorable disposition of implementors; (8) the complexity of joint action; (9) ambiguous goals and communications; (10) faulty theory of causation; (11) faulty study design; (12) a non-participatory process; and (13) uncertainties. Collectively, these various efforts at conceptual frameworks provide a good aid to synthesizing thought about implementation and appreciating the complexity of the process. They not only provide a good checklist for anticipating the problems of the process, but point to the need to redirect research attention in the area to developing more integrated frameworks that can be applied in actual research situation. An example is the model by Van Meter and Van Horn (1975) which, while containing elements of each of the thirteen components, posits only the disposition of implementing officials to be the single most inclusive and relevant variable for understanding the implementation problem (Morah 1990).

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